

Outside the net

The lack of recognition by the state continues to cast women in fishing outside the net in Sri Lanka

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While increasingly, around the globe, women's participation in fisheries is being captured in government statistical records, the data on active fishers compiled by the Department of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources in Sri Lanka is not disaggregated by sex. The underlying reasoning is that the number of women contributing to the fisheries sector is so low that it does not warrant such data disaggregation. However, primary data collected for doctoral research by the first author of this article showed that there were a sizeable 596 women engaged in fisheries in Trincomalee, one of the main fish producing districts located in the eastern province of the country. Therefore, exclusion of women from government enumeration deepens their invisibility in the sector.

Women's invisibility in the labour market is a current issue of debate in Sri Lanka's policy and advocacy circles. While social media activists, elected officials and the media take sides on a range of issues regarding women, alarms are being sounded on the declining female labour force participation. Women's participation in the labour force is fundamental for the larger national economy. Further, at the micro level, the work of women contributes to the well-being of the family, in particular, the welfare of children and most importantly to the women themselves. The question here is whether the declining trends of women's labour force participation is because they are not counted in government data, especially in sectors where their labour is rendered invisible by government action, as in the case of the fisheries sector.

This article highlights the difficult physical terrain that women navigate in order to make a living in coastal Trincomalee in Sri Lanka; and their inability to access services that the Government of Sri Lanka provides to the fisher community, solely because they lack recognition by the State. Women fishers therefore lack the financial and physical support required to improve their livelihood opportunities.

The case of Trincomalee fisheries shows the need to treat women as a heterogeneous group, understand the different sub-groupings that they belong to, and recognise how these sub-groups are marginalised by the actions of the state and society. The notion of intersectionality seeks to analyse how multiple identities work simultaneously to create fissures of power and victimisation among different groups of fishers. This analysis highlights how women bear the brunt of being left out of access to government support, primarily because of gender discrimination in fisheries policy. Women fishers also get excluded due to ethno-religious affiliations, and because of where they live.

Trincomalee is an ethno-religiously diverse district in Sri Lanka, where all three major ethnic groups—Muslims, Tamils and Sinhalese—engage in fishing. Cultural norms in all three groupings dictate that fisheries related spaces are not for women; in fact, participation of women is seen as bringing misfortune to an activity that is very strongly dependent on chance. The following extract brings out this cultural bias.

Interviewer:

“Have you been to sea by boat?”

Respondent (daughter of female gleaner, Muslim):

“People will not take the girls in the *vallam* (beach seine boat). They don't allow the women to touch the boat even. They say that there won't be a fish catch if we touch the boat. They say it will bring *tharthiriyam* (misfortune). Small girls are allowed to touch the boats but not young and married women. Once my elder brother scolded me when I touched the boat, and after that I have never touched it.”

Interestingly, despite restrictive cultural norms and ideologies, many Tamil and Muslim women also participate in fisheries, fishing in shallow sea areas and gleaning clams, prawns and crab in the numerous lagoons. But the women's work is not visible since landing sites and fish markets are clearly identified as public spaces dominated by men. This is an extension of the idea that women's role is within the safe confines of the household, and not in public spaces where one's safety cannot be guaranteed.

The three-decade long civil war in Sri Lanka that directly affected the Trincomalee district

also shaped notions of security and safety, especially for women. However, women have to leave their homes to pursue livelihood options. During certain times of the year, in an area just South of Trincomalee town called Kinniya, on the beach itself, women wait patiently on the margins until the beach seine nets are pulled ashore by men who dump 'leftovers' on the beach, which the women sieve through for seaweed. In other locations, women leave for the lagoon after they finish their morning household chores and return just before noon, with a day's catch of prawn or clam. These women use the income they generate to support their daily expenses, purchase assets, and save for future investments.

Women, however, tend to steer clear of public spaces such as fish landing sites and stay closer to home—a trend noted specifically among Muslim women, who have a strong presence in the lagoons, mostly because their houses are located in the nearby vicinity in Trincomalee. They sell their fish catch locally, within their own communities. For Tamil Hindu women engaging in fishing, their caste identities and pre-existing informal networks are critical factors, either to their benefit or detriment. Muslim and Tamil women are also often stopped and questioned by the Sri Lankan military which is largely composed of the majority Sinhalese ethnicity, when attempting to access the lagoons. With no proper identification cards issued by the Fisheries Department, the women have had to defend their livelihood options, often through negotiations that involve their male relatives.

However, it is among the indigenous Veder community that the study notes marked differences compared to the other women in Trincomalee. The women and men work side by side, pulling the nets ashore and working together in order to earn a living. However, while women have more freedom to engage in fishing, the community as a whole encounters other obstacles. They literally occupy the margins of Trincomalee, living in an area called Vakarai, bordering Trincomalee and Batticaloa. They have poor access to education and health, leaving them outside larger post-war development processes taking place in the Eastern Province. Therefore, they continue to depend on the traditional livelihood of fishing, that too within strict geographic confines.

Some interesting trends are also noted in the fish markets. Sinhalese men dominate the large scale buying and selling of fish. A relatively younger generation of Sinhalese 'war entrepreneurs' moved in from Northern Trincomalee, to fill the void created by the older generation of businessmen who were displaced from Trincomalee by war-related violence. The new entrepreneurs established control over the wholesale market by negotiating the complex civil-military bureaucracy that was in place during the war. The Muslims and Tamils remain outside these markets. Their male identity is not adequate for the men from the minority ethnicities to carve out a space within the fish markets of Trincomalee fisheries wholesale sector.

Thus, for both women and men engaged in fishing, attempting to understand their life chances through the lens of only a gender or an ethnic identity fails to capture the multitude of ways in power has to be negotiated within the sector.

At present, the Department of Fisheries and Aquaculture in Sri Lanka is redrafting the fisheries policy, an exercise that drew upon insights from our study. In any attempt to promote sustainable livelihoods among women, especially in the war-affected regions such as Trincomalee, women's contribution to the fishing industry must be duly acknowledged and recognised. The policy being drafted can help women working in the fringes of the sector, to be given due recognition, and access to policy support and assistance they deserve. While Sections 2.5.2 and 2.5.10 of the Draft Bill categorically mention the support to be rendered to women, at present, policy support is restricted to women who are the wives of men who are registered as fishers with the Fisheries Department. Ironically, the women struggling to earn a living in the brackish backwaters in the lagoons remain invisible and excluded in the new policy document.

In discussions around women in fisheries, while it is important to explore new avenues of employment generation, it is equally important to address issues faced by women in their existing occupations; and government policy interventions should seek to support their work. Such interventions can generate multiplier effects, with positive impacts on women's working conditions, their earnings, and the well-being of their families. ❏

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